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Predatory Towing On The Rise In Montgomery County

By: Matt Bush // June 15, 2012



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Ariel Dovas (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/eviloars/4004533630/>)

There's little local lawmakers can do to prevent predatory towing, says Montgomery County's consumer protection office chief.

Most people have seen the signs in parking lots: these spots are only for customers of a certain store or apartment building. Drivers who get caught going somewhere else will have their car towed.

The restrictions can lead to many predatory towing complaints being submitted to the Maryland Office of Consumer Protection. In the Montgomery County office, those calls are all too frequent.

"We have towers who are not staying in the impoundment lot waiting to get a call to from the property owner to respond to a towing situation, but lying in wait, which is where the term predatory comes from," says Eric Friedman, director of the county's consumer protection office. "And in a matter of seconds, [they] will swoop in and tow the vehicle."

Traffic congestion continues to rise in the county, which in turn cuts down on the availability of street parking, particularly in the central business districts. That's where some of the parking lots in question are, according to Friedman.

"We've literally had consumers who have paid, as the result of towing, \$200 for a burger, \$150 for coffee or a donut, and \$168 for a Chinese dinner they were picking up," Friedman says.

Federal law pretty much prevents local governments from doing anything to curb predatory towing. In Montgomery County, the practice is most common in Wheaton, Bethesda, and Silver Spring according.

Those are also business districts the county has spent millions of dollars refurbishing, Friedman points out.

"Nothing will kill efforts to revitalize an area anything greater than being towed from there," he says.

The county government may not be able to do much to stop the practice...but Friedman says vehicle owners do have some recourse if they feel they've been towed unfairly. First and foremost, all drivers should check the signs in the parking lot.

"The law says it has to be at the entrance. And it has to be clearly visible day and night from every parking spot. And it must be a permanent sign," Friedman explains.

If a vehicle owner takes the matter to small claims court, they can win back up to three times the amount they were forced to pay the tower. The consumer protection office can also fight the matter, but it can't win the amount of damages consumers can through their own personal suit.